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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to assess the long-term effects of a corporate training program in business and technical writing. Subjects were 135 employees who attended ten three-day workshops during the course of one year. The effects of the workshops were assessed in two stages: immediately after the training through an evaluation form and one to two years later through an interview. The interview consisted of 6 open-ended questions and 42 closed-ended questions. Results indicated that (1) those elements of the writing workshop that remained most useful to the participants were those relating to organizing material and exercises in writing clearly and concisely, (2) the training in writing skills did appear to have some carry-over effect to reading skills, and (3) those areas of the training program that might be changed for best effect are the format (three-day), and the scheduling (Monday-Tuesday-Wednesday). Business communication consultants can improve their working relationships with their clients by offering such long-term follow-up assessments as part of their portfolios. (Appended is the interview guide for the follow-up assessment of the corporate seminars on written communications.) (HOD)

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ASSESSING CORPORATE TRAINING PROGRAMS IN BUSINESS COMMUNICATIONS

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ABSTRACT

This study presents 1) a model for business communications consultants to add to their portfolios for use in conducting follow-up assessments of corporate programs in communications, and 2) the results of the model in action as it was used to assess the long-term effects of a Business/Technical Writing program at a major oil company. The use of the assessment model will enable the consultant 1) to determine those elements of training which remain useful over time, 2) to discuss the carry-over effects of the training to other areas of communication, and 3) to suggest areas for change, addition, or deletion in the corporate communication program.

INTRODUCTION

Many major and minor corporations sponsor in-house programs in communications. These programs include training professional and technical employees in Business and Technical Writing, Oral Presentation Skills, Interpersonal Communications, and Small-group Dynamics. Most follow-up assessments of these programs consist either of immediate group critiques or of brief written evaluations collected and tabulated by the training departments. Seldom are any long-term, formal assessments made of the value of the training as perceived by the participants after a year or more. Such assessments are costly and time-consuming, and they require special expertise to design, conduct, and evaluate.

Despite these drawbacks, many companies value these formal assessments and prefer to hire outside consultants to conduct them. For the consultant brings not only that special expertise, he or she also brings necessary objectivity to the assessment process.

Unfortunately, few business communications consultants offer long-term evaluations as one of their services. They are willing to conduct needs analyses, to design training programs which meet specific learning objectives, to work with in-house trainers in presenting the programs, and to conduct short-term or immediate assessments based on the objectives of the program. But the process too often stops there.

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And the consultant loses a valuable opportunity to serve his client.

The purposes of this paper then, are: 1) to provide business communications consultants with a model interview guide which can be adapted to assessments of different programs, 2) to alert the consultant to some of the problems in conducting an assessment, and 3) to present the results and implications of a long-term assessment of a corporate training program based on this model.

ASSESSING THE PROGRAM

The Study

The study assesses the long-term effects of a corporate training program in business/technical writing. The instrument for assessing the program (see Appendix 1) was designed by a team of professional trainers and consultants from education and from industry. The study is based on tracking one hundred thirty-five professional and scientific employees of a major oil company who participated in a three-day workshop on business/technical writing. Three specific questions formed the basis for the study: 1) which elements of the training remain most useful over time? 2) does training in writing skills have some carry-over effect to other communications skills? 3) what areas of the training program might for best effect be changed, added to, or deleted from the corporate training program?

The Workshop

The workshop was one of a series of required orientation and training programs for newly-hired as well as for more senior employees. The training took place during 1978-79. The target sample was one hundred thirty-five employees who attended ten workshops during 1978-79. The duration of each workshop was three days.

The workshops were conducted by a team of professional educators and trainers working closely with the corporate training department. The size of each workshop was limited to fifteen participants. The team of three instructors included a workshop leader, an expert in technical writing, and a grammarian/logician. The ratio of one instructor to no more than five participants allowed for immediate feedback on the writing exercises as well as for some variety of opinion regarding organization, style, and effectiveness of expression.

In addition to completing exercises in grammar, syntax, and organization, each participant wrote at least five business or technical reports, memos, and summaries based on actual formats required by the corporate departments.

The format for the workshop was based on the objectives established by the consulting team and the training department. The objectives as stated at the outset of the workshop were: after completing

the course, the participants will be able to 1) recognize and correct their problems with grammar, 2) analyze the needs of the reader, 3) organize their materials according to the evidence, 4) state their conclusions and recommendations clearly and concisely, 5) summarize their own reports or the reports of others, and 6) write, revise, and edit a basic report.

ASSESSING THE EFFECTS OF THE WORKSHOP

The effects of the workshop were assessed in two stages: immediately after the training and one to two years later.

The first stage consisted of an evaluation by the participants immediately after the final session. Each participant filled out a brief, standard evaluation form which asked for their opinions and comments, and which also measured the relative intensity of their reactions to such elements as the relevance of the materials, the organization of the workshop, and the instructors' presentations. They could give their comments anonymously, if they wished.

But the problem with immediate post-training evaluation such as this is that the participants tend to give high marks because they are relieved to have finished a grueling three-day workshop. Further, they have not had time to assimilate the material into their daily writing activities so they cannot accurately gauge the usefulness of the workshop.

The second stage in the assessment process, a longitudinal study of the effects of the workshop, took place one to two years after the participants had completed the training. This stage is divided into three steps: 1) designing the interview guide, 2) conducting the interviews, and 3) evaluating the results.

Designing the Interview Guide

The consulting group commissioned to design the interview guide and to conduct the interviews consisted of a former research director of a national opinion research firm, a professor of speech communication at a major university, and a graduate research assistant.

The interview guide consists of twelve statements or broad questions to which the interviewee is asked to respond. Eight questions have subsections which bring the total number of items in the guide to forty-eight. Of these, six questions are open-ended, forty-two questions are closed-ended.

The open-ended questions ask for recalled information and for value judgments: e.g., What are the two or three most important things you learned from the workshop? Which of these is the most important? Why do you think it is the most important?

The closed-ended questions usually ask for specific information as well as for value judgments. However, the first question (Q1) asks the interviewee first to recall specifically things he or she did or did not like about the workshop. If the interviewee could not recall, the interviewer probed for responses. Since the time between attending the workshop and the interview was for many participants as long as two years, the probing technique enabled the interviewer to collect otherwise irretrievable information. In addition, many participants were able, after having their memories jogged, to provide valuable insights into later questions about the carry-over effect of the training, i.e., the effect of writing skills on their ability to read critically the reports of others.

The personal information questions were placed at the end of the guide to forestall any hostility that questions about age or promotions might evoke. The interviewer did not ask the interviewee's sex but merely recorded it on the basis of name and voice.

Conducting the Interviews

As a preliminary step, the interviewers called five participants primarily to test the guide but also to establish an average time for each interview. The company furnished the list of participants' names, their locations in the region, and their phone numbers. The company made its WATS lines available so that these who had been transferred could be reached. The interviews were conducted over a five-week period. The interviewers called five hours a day - from 9 AM to 12 Noon and from 1 PM to 3PM - on Tuesdays, Wednesdays, and Thursdays of five consecutive weeks.

The interviewers were able to contact 87 of the target sample of 135 participants. Of the 48 remaining, 24 had left the company, 23 could not be reached, and 1 refused to be interviewed. Of the 23 who could not be reached, 20 had off-shore responsibilities. The remaining either did not respond to repeated requests that they call back or their secretaries were unable to locate them.

Evaluating the Results

Following the interview period, the research assistant and a statistician-programmer keypunched the data for entry into a computer. The data was then analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). Because the computations of the various percentages and frequencies for the 98 variables generated 19 pages on the printout, the following analysis is concerned only with the broader questions posed to the interviewees and with the demographic data.

With one exception, the evaluations will be reported in the order the questions appear on the interview guide. The demographic data, which appears last on the guide, will be reported first to give a general overview of the sample.

As one might expect of a sample drawn from the exploration and

production divisions of one of the world's largest oil companies, the majority of those interviewed were scientists and engineers.

Position	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Engineers	40	(46.0)
Geologists	17	(19.6)
Accountants	9	(10.3)
Computer Tech	6	(6.9)
Geophysicists	4	(4.6)
Other	11	(12.6)
Total	87	(100)

The "other" category included attorneys, executive secretaries, land acquisition specialists, and one helicopter pilot.

The interviews revealed that the sample was generally young: 70% under thirty, none over sixty years of age. They were well-educated: 93% had college degrees; 27% had advanced degrees. Men outnumbered women four-to-one: 79% men, 21% women.

The responses to Q.1, what they did or did not like about the workshop, were as follows:

Subject	Liked	(Freq.%)	Disliked	(Freq.%)
Teachers	85	(97.7%)	2	(2.3%)
Format (3-Day)	65	(74.7%)	22	(25.2%)
Location	83	(94.3%)	4	(4.6%)
Scheduling*	66	(75.9%)	13	(14.9%)
Organization*	84	(96.5%)	2	(3.3%)
Content*	79	(90.8%)	7	(8.0%)

* The missing cases, those who chose not to respond to probing by the interviewers, account for the shortfalls in the totals. Asterisks will denote missing cases throughout this study.

When asked Q.2, "what are the two or three most important things you learned from the workshop?", the interviewees responded with nine elements:

Category	Frequency	(%)
Organization	21	(24.1)
Clarity and Conciseness	20	(23.0)
Preparation	8	(9.2)
Reader Analysis	8	(9.2)
Review of Basics	6	(6.9)
Review of Grammar	4	(4.6)
Proofing and Editing	4	(4.6)
Personal Approach	4	(4.6)
Avoiding Jargon	2	(2.3)
No response	10	(11.5)
Total	87	(100)

But when they were asked to choose the single most important element of the training, the interviewees cited Clarity and Conciseness over Organization by nearly two to one: 19 to 11.

Q.3: What kinds of writing are part of your day-to-day activity?

Type	Freq.	(%)
Requests for funding	51	(58.6)
Technical reports	14	(16.1)
Memos	10	(11.5)
Proposals	3	(3.4)
Recommendations	3	(3.4)
Instructions	2	(2.3)
Minutes	2	(2.3)
Non-tech reports	1	(1.2)
No response	1	(1.2)
Total	87	(100)

The responses to Q.3 may explain in part the participants' emphasis on clarity and conciseness found in Q.2. The corporation requires that all requests for funds be submitted according to a particular format. Consequently, the writers are concerned less with organization than with clarity and conciseness.

The participants' perceptions of the amount of change in their writing abilities as a result of the three-day workshop (Q.4) were positive but not unrealistically so. The rating scale was 1 = little change, 5 = great deal of change.

Scale	Freq.	(%)
1	6	(6.9)
2	27	(31.0)
3	40	(46.0)
4	10	(11.5)
5	2	(2.3)
No response	2	(2.3)
Total	87	(100)

The average was 2.8.

The questions concerned with the importance of writing ability to success in their particular jobs, their general field, and to success as supervisors (Q.5a, 5b, 5c) drew surprisingly positive responses from the interviewees.

Q.5a: Importance of Writing Skill to Effective Job Performance.

Category	Freq.	(%)
Very Important	48	(55.2)
Important	32	(36.8)
Not Important	7	(8.0)
	87	(100)

Q.5b: Importance of Writing Skill to Success in Field

Category	Freq.	(%)
Very Important	66	(75.9)
Important	20	(23.0)
Not Important	1	(1.1)
	87	(100)

Q.5c: Importance of Writing Skill to Success as Supervisor

Category	Freq.	(%)
Very Important	76	(87.4)
Important	11	(12.6)
Not Important	-	-
	87	(100)

(The overwhelmingly strong response to Q.5c provides some insight into the division between professional and scientific employees and their supervisors. During 1978-79 no supervisors attended the writing workshop. Beginning in early 1980 and continuing through 1981, supervisors have been urged and even "volunteered" by their managers to attend the workshop. As of July, 1981, however, no managers had attended the workshop.)

Q.6 asks for the relative importance of eight different elements of the workshop to the participants' writing skills. The scale is the same as for Q.5.

Q.6a: Learning to Organize Material.

Category	Freq.	(%)
Very Important	80	(92.0)
Important	6	(6.9)
Not Important	1	(1.1)
	87	(100)

Q.6b: Learning to Forecast Content

Category	Freq.	(%)
Very Important	45	(51.7)
Important	39	(44.8)
Not Important	3	(3.5)
	87	(100)

Q.6c: Learning to be Concise

Category	Freq.	(%)
Very Important	78	(89.7)
Important	8	(9.2)
Not Important	1	(1.1)
	87	(100)

Q.6d: Learning to be Clear

Category	Freq.	(%)
Very Important	79	(90.9)
Important	7	(8.0)
Not Important	1	(1.1)
	87	(100)

Q.6e: Learning to Avoid Passives

Category	Freq.	(%)
Very Important	31	(35.6)
Important	47	(54.0)
Not Important	7	(8.0)
No response	2	(2.4)
	87	(100)

Q.6f: Learning to Analyze Reader's Needs

Category	Freq.	(%)
Very Important	65	(74.8)
Important	19	(21.8)
Not Important	3	(3.4)
	87	(100)

Q.6g: Learning to Use Sample Reports and Formats

Category	Freq.	(%)
Very Important	38	(43.7)
Important	41	(47.1)
Not Important	8	(9.2)
	87	(100)

Q.6h: Usefulness of Business Writer's Handbook

Category	Freq.	(%)
Very Important	34	(39.1)
Important	36	(41.4)
Not Important	17	(19.5)
	87	(100)

The participants were asked to estimate the amount of time they spent in various communication activities during an average workday (Q.7a, 7b, 7c, 7d). The author and the consultants who designed the interview guide erred in assuming that the interviewees would respond to questions about time spent reading, conversing, and listening in the same scale as the question about writing (see Appendix, Q.7). Instead, they responded with a different scale so that it is difficult to make accurate comparisons of the relative amounts of time spent

engaged in the four activities.

Q.7a: How much of your daily time is spent writing?

Category	Freq.	(%)
50% +	14	(16.1)
25% - 50%	26	(29.9)
10% - 25%	23	(26.4)
0% - 10%	24	(27.6)
	87	(100)

Q.7b: How much of your daily time is spent reading?

Category	Freq.	(%)
50% +	4	(4.6)
40% - 50%	4	(4.6)
30% - 40%	7	(8.0)
20% - 30%	28	(32.2)
10% - 20%	35	(40.2)
0% - 10%	8	(9.2)
-0%	1	(1.2)
	87	(100)

Q.7c: How much of your daily time is spent conversing?

Category	Freq.	(%)
50% +	12	(13.8)
40% - 50%	9	(10.3)
30% - 40%	13	(14.9)
20% - 30%	30	(34.5)
10% - 20%	21	(24.1)
0% - 10%	2	(2.4)
	87	(100)

Q.7d: How much of your daily time is spent listening?

Category	Freq.	(%)
50% +	3	(3.4)
40% - 50%	3	(3.4)
30% - 40%	6	(6.9)
20% - 30%	31	(35.6)
10% - 20%	29	(33.3)
0% - 10%	-	-
-0%	15	(17.4)
	87	(100)

(The responses to this question led the evaluators of the data to conclude, inescapably, that 15 of the 87 participants do not listen at all.)

Q.8 probes the participants' perceptions of the carry-over effect of training in writing to other communication skills. Here again the author and the consultants erred, this time by clarifying the question, if asked to do so, in terms of one particular skill--reading.

Q.8a: "Although the workshop focused on writing skills, has what you learned in that class affected your abilities or skills in other areas?" (If asked to explain: Has what you learned there improved your ability, say, to read critically, that is, your ability to judge the quality of what others have written?)

Category	Freq.	(%)
Yes	72	(82.8)
No	15	(17.2)

Q.8b: In what ways has your reading ability improved?

Category	Freq.	(%)
More critical of others' reports	35	(40.2)
Better able to understand purpose of reports	10	(11.6)
Better able to sift for relevant facts	8	(9.2)
Better able to understand organization of reports	5	(5.7)
Better able to edit reports of others	2	(2.3)
No response	27	(31.0)

The responses to Q.9a, "In the months since you took the workshop, have you referred to any of the materials you received from the instructors?", were most disheartening for the instructors of the workshop: Yes 14 (16.0%) No 73 (84%)

However, in response to Q.9b, "Have you referred to the Business Writer's Handbook?", the participants' answers were much more positive: Yes 53 (61%) No 28 (32.2%) No response 6 (6.8%)

Q.10 asks the participants to suggest topics for a one-day follow-up session to the workshop.

Category	Freq.	(%)
Technical Writing	43	(49.5)
Editing	24	(27.7)
Review Organization	10	(11.4)
Use of Company Formats	4	(4.6)
Review of Grammar	4	(4.6)
No response	2	(2.2)
	87	(100)

Q.11, "What else about the workshop would you like to comment on?", serves as a wrap-up to that part of the guide concerned with the

workshop. Most of the participants felt the interview covered the major issues of the workshop. A surprising number, 76 (87.4%) suggested that their supervisors attend the workshop so that employees and supervisors would have grounds for agreement concerning the company's report writing requirements.

Summary

At the beginning of this study three questions were posed which formed the basis for the project. The answers to these questions are as follows:

1. Those elements of the writing workshop which remain most useful to the participants over a one- to two-year period are those related to organizing material and exercises in writing clearly, and concisely. These elements are deemed most useful because they were foremost in the participants' recollections of the training and because they were by far the most frequently mentioned.

2. The training in writing skills does appear to have some carry-over effect to reading skills. Unfortunately, the question as phrased biases the responses so that no clear answer can be made at this time. It is worth noting, however, that over 80% of the participants believed that the training had improved their ability to read critically.

3. Those areas of the training program which might for best effect be changed are the format (3-day), and the scheduling (Monday-Tuesday-Wednesday). The other four areas, Instructors, Organization, Content, and Location, all received better than 90% positive responses. In addition, including supervisors in the training sessions, either as part of a heterogeneous group of employees or in special sessions designed especially for supervisors, was viewed by the participants as a necessary change in the company's training program. Finally, adding a one-day follow-up or refresher session on such topics as technical writing and editing would be well-received by the participants.

CONCLUSION

Business communication consultants can improve their working relationships with their clients by offering long-term follow-up assessments as part of their portfolios. Such assessments should be designed, conducted, and evaluated with the full knowledge and approval of the in-house training department, and the measuring instruments should be rigorously scrutinized for biases. If offered judiciously, and in conjunction with other services, follow-up assessments can not only solidify existing client-consultant relationships, they can also be an effective device for marketing the communication consultant's services to prospective clients.

APPENDIX 1

INTERVIEW GUIDE FOR FOLLOW-UP
ASSESSMENT OF
CORPORATE SEMINAR ON WRITTEN COMMUNICATIONS

DATE_____ NAME OF INTERVIEWEE_____

Phone #_____

Introduction:

Hello, my name is_____and I'm calling from _____University. We're conducting a research survey of those who attended the company's Written Communications Seminar in 1978-79. The purpose of this survey is to get information which will help improve future workshops.

The interview will take about fifteen minutes. Is this a convenient time for you or should I call back?

(If call back: When would it be convenient for me to call you back?)

DATE_____

TIME_____

NOTE: Be sure to call back at the proper time.

1. I'd like to begin by asking you to name things about the workshop that you particularly liked or disliked:

	Volunteered		Probed	
	Like	Dislike	Like	Dislike
Teacher(s)				
Format (3 day)				
Setting (Location)				
Scheduling (M-W, W-F)				
Organization				
Content				
Other (Specify)				

2. What are the two or three most important things you learned from the workshop?

(IF MORE THAN ONE, ASK:)

Which of these is the most important?

Why do you think it is the most important thing you learned from the workshop?

3. What kinds of writing are part of your day-to-day activity?

A. Requests for funds_____

B. Job Orders_____

C. Requisitions_____

D. Instructions_____

E. Manuals_____

F. Reports: Type?_____

_____

G. Other: Specify_____

_____

_____

_____

4. This next question deals with the amount of change in your writing abilities that was brought about as a result of the workshop.

I'd like for you to picture in your mind a 5 point scale.

"1" represents little or no change; "5" represents a great deal of change.

With this scale in mind, please select a number on the scale which best represents the extent to which your writing skills have changed as a result of the workshop. Remember, "1" represents little or no change; "5" represents a lot of change.

5_____4_____3_____2_____1_____

NOTE: Ask: Why did you choose 1 or 5 only if E chooses 1 or 5.

5. In the next few questions, I'm going to ask you to rate the importance of writing skills in your job.

   I will ask you to tell me for each item whether you think it is Very Important, Important, or Not Very Important.

   How important is your writing skill to the effective performance of your job?

   Would you say it is:

   Very_____Important_____Not Very_____

   In your opinion, how important is being able to write effectively to success in your field?

   Very_____Important_____Not Very_____

   How important is it for good supervisors to write effectively?

   Very_____Important_____Not Very_____

6. In the workshop, the instructors covered several topics. Using the same scale, VI, I, NVI, please rate the following topics in terms of their importance to your writing:

How to organize your material	VI	I	NVI
How to forecast your content	VI	I	NVI
How to be concise	VI	I	NVI
How to be clear	VI	I	NVI
How to avoid passive constructions	VI	I	NVI
How to analyze the reader's needs	VI	I	NVI
Use of sample reports and formats as examples to follow	VI	I	NVI
Business Writer's Handbook as a desk reference	VI	I	NVI

7. How much of your daily time is spent in writing?

   More than 50%_; more than 25%_; more than 10%_; less than 10%_.

   What percent of your daily time at work is spent in other kinds of communications?

   Reading?_____; speaking/talking?_____%; listening?_____

8. Although the workshop focused on writing skills, has what you learned in that class affected your abilities or skills in other areas?

(If asked to explain: has what you learned there improved your ability, for example to read critically, that is, your ability to judge the quality of what others have written?)

In what ways has your reading ability improved?

9. In the months since you took the workshop, have you referred to any of the materials you received from the instructors?

Yes_____ No_____

Which materials?

About how many times a week/month have you referred to them?

Have you referred to the Business Writer's Handbook?

Yes_____ No_____

About how often? weekly?_____ monthly?_____

10. If the company were to offer a one-day follow-up session, what topics would be more helpful to you?

11. What else about the workshop would you like to comment on?

12. Demographics

Position/Title_____

Have you been promoted within the last two years? Yes___ No___

Age: 20-30_____

30-40_____

40-50_____

50-60_____

Over 60___

College degree? Yes____ No____ Type of degree?_____

Graduate or Professional degree? Yes___ No___ Type of degree_____

DO NOT ASK, JUST RECORD:

Sex M_____ F_____